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John Claborn, *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1895-1941* (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp.vii + 203, £85.00

John Claborn's *Civil Rights and the Environment* is a timely contribution, which expands a groundbreaking body of humanities scholarship that thinks environment in relation to race, and thereby challenges pernicious environmentalisms built on white supremacist ideologies. Like other new and forthcoming titles in Bloomsbury's exciting *Environmental Cultures* series, Claborn's work shows how interlocking histories of racialization, colonialism, and capitalism have produced an age of environmental crisis. Claborn usefully focuses not on the (some would say overly) well-documented U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, but rather on the preceding civil rights struggles that marked an earlier era, and that often failed. Beginning after Reconstruction's orchestrated collapse, and centering African American history's nadir, Claborn explores literary responses to this period's environmental disasters, such as the 1927 Mississippi flood, the boll weevil epidemic, and the industrial North's ecological degradation, all of which disproportionately impacted African Americans. Ending rather than beginning with the dawn of the mid-century Civil Rights, Claborn demonstrates that environmentalism has always been intimately bound up with the struggles of African American people. This is important because, while contemporary environmental justice movements and key monographs such as Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* have increased awareness of white supremacy's constitutive entanglements with environmental damage, such connections are often elided in histories focusing on earlier periods. Civil rights struggles from 1895-1941 were frequently unsuccessful in their time, but they established critical infrastructure not only for the legislative gains of a later era, but also, as historian Blair L.M. Kelley has pointed out, for

understanding wider movement building over a *longue durée* that encompasses our own time.[1]

Indicating the urgent necessity of such scholarship, *Civil Rights and the Environment* nicely complements related studies published around the same time, including Sonya Posmentier's *Cultivation and Catastrophe* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2017) and Susan Scott Parrish's *The Flood Year 1927* (Princeton UP, 2017). Claborn builds on foundational scholarship identifying African American culture's deep and longstanding, if often overlooked or misrepresented, environmental concerns. Pushing back against failures characteristic of an earlier era of scholarship, Claborn emphasizes the necessity of engaging with the environment materially and historically, rather than simply as a tool for signification in the African American literary tradition. At the same time, Claborn orients himself against the "tragic narrative of African-American engagements with the environment" that he argues dominates more recent, materialist scholarship on the topic (7). Disappointingly, Claborn largely elides contributions of two scholars who likewise complicate a one-sided tragic view of African Americans' engagements with nature: Camille Dungy (who appears only on the book's back cover, praising the work) and Dianne Glave, Black women writers whose work crucially bridges literary and scholarly treatments of race and environment.

Across five finely detailed chapters covering writers as disparate as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Effie Lee Newsome, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Attaway, Claborn argues for a "black environmental ecoliterary imagination" that is pluralist, historically grounded, and frequently in contradiction with itself. He begins with the provocative argument that beneath Washington's famously accommodationist rhetoric lies a more visionary recognition of agency as ecological, practised by Black agricultural labors

[1] *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010)

who, in employing conservationist approaches, covertly resist a white status quo. Seeking rare common ground between Washington and the ideologically opposed Du Bois, Claborn locates Du Bois similarly out of doors: in the Grand Canyon, where he finds spiritual nourishment despite Jim Crow's long reach. Claborn offers an invigorating reading of *Darkwater*, a 1920 text that "maps the disjunctive spaces of modernity and the double environments of the color line by engaging with the discourses of emergent environmentalist movements" (46). These movements, led by figures including John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, were not only white-dominated but often overtly racist romanticisations of a masculinist U.S. nationalism. Yet Claborn, convincingly pushing against critics like Paul Outka who theorize the natural world as traumatic in African American contexts, nevertheless locates the heart of Black nationalism on similar terrain. Claborn highlights Du Bois's romantic investments linking Black Americans and the soil as well as the wilderness, which, in Du Bois's reading of the African American tradition, offered "both a refuge and a difficult spiritual trial" (51). An overview of the career of Col. Charles Young, the first African American superintendent of a national park, whose friendship with Du Bois was crucial to *Darkwater's* composition, is this chapter's highlight. Claborn extends this analysis to environmental themes in the NAACP's *Crisis* (edited by Du Bois), with a particularly compelling treatment of Effie Lee Newsome. While Newsome has been sidelined as "merely" a nature and children's poet wedded to essentializing organicist tropes, Claborn's detailed close readings demonstrate this view's limitations. He uncovers the "subtle racial critique" with which Newsome "inflects her taxonomies," not only of birds but of mothers, domestic spaces, and teachers (95), and goes on to identify similar aesthetic and political moves linking natural history and conservation to "the color-line problem" in the work of other, more celebrated, *Crisis* writers and poets.

The book's final two chapters extend the ecological agency with which Claborn began to solidify his argument that the African American fight for civil rights "has always been environmental"; particularly in his treatment of Hurston and Attaway, he limns a "Marxian-ecological critique" that reveals "the full, interconnected scope of civil rights and environmental struggles today" (11). Analysing Hurston's ethnographic and autobiographical writing and fiction, Claborn shows that southern landscapes, particularly swamplands, have generated ecological collectives with radical possibilities that, despite their instabilities and dangers, remain inassimilable to the "white-capitalist order" (132). Perhaps most powerfully, his reading of *Blood on the Forge* illustrates the need to "demand an alternative" to that order itself, recognising that "violence done to the earth is reproduced at the ideological level" as racialisation and labor exploitation (163). In contrast to environmentalisms that pit nature's interest against humans' (e.g. deep ecology or Aldo Leopold's land ethic), the insights Claborn develops suggest that the belief that humans are universally monsters bent on destroying our world is a cover, perhaps unwitting, for racial capitalism. Ultimately, this important ecohistorical study helps us see that redressing global climate catastrophe today requires a reparative approach that extends, I would argue, far beyond the juridical framework of civil rights, to the radical collective possibilities richly imagined across the Black cultural tradition.

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